

## Article

# Prosocial and Aggressive Behavior Occurrence in Young Athletes: Field Research Results in Six European Countries

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**Abstract:** Aggression and violence among youth are researched as social phenomena in sport. This paper was designed to determine the occurrence of these behaviors as well as prosocial behaviors among young athletes. The current paper is a research report aiming to detect the frequency of aggressive behavior, social exclusion, prosocial behavior and cohesion in the youth environment, the frequency of personal experience of peer violence or social exclusion, and to evaluate cross-national differences in terms of occurrence of these phenomena. The field research was conducted in six European countries (Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, and Serbia) on a sample of 482 children aged 6 to 16. The conducted questionnaire consisted of pre-existing scales and measures for specific behaviors and social aspects that formed the Youth Environment Assessment and Youth Characteristics Questionnaire. Previous personal experience of violence and social exclusion determined groups in the sample. One-way ANOVA and discriminant analysis were conducted to compare various variables and groups within the sample. The results have shown that aggressive and social exclusion behaviors are rare or very rare, predominantly in the form of verbal aggression in the sports club environment. The results of the conducted discriminant analysis indicate that prosocial and cohesion behaviors occur “quite often” to “often” among sports club athletes’ samples. The percentage of athletes who have had personal experience of violence or social exclusion in the last two years and whose feeling of hurt by that experience was assessed as “a lot” or “fully” on the measurement scale is estimated to be approximately 25%. Mild cross-national differences emerged in the overmentioned variables, probably due to the sample specificity, or to cultural variety. The results indicate the need for longitudinal research on this topic since the sport is an environment in which cohesion can be developed among young athletes, but it is not free from social exclusion or aggression.

**Keywords:** aggression; social exclusion; motivation; youth; sport

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## 1. Introduction

Aggression and violence are among the most significant social phenomena that researchers approach from many scientific perspectives. The reason for it lies in the fact that aggression and violence are widespread. Aggression and violence take many forms that may vary from the form of “minor” acts (such as name-calling or pushing) to “more serious” acts (such as hitting, kicking, or punching) to “serious” acts (such as stabbing, shooting, or killing) [1]. Hence different definitions of aggression and violence in the literature, since these are phenomena that are multifaceted, socially constructed, and highly ambivalent [2–4]. Therefore, within this paper, we have used the definition of aggression retrieved from social psychology, according to which aggression is “behavior that is intended to harm another person who is motivated to avoid that harm” [1,5,6]. We also used the definition of the World Health Organization, which defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” [7,8].

As the opposite of aggression and violence, we define prosocial behavior, which concerns a range of actions that aim at bringing some benefits to other people [9]. Different factors may determine its expression. For example, the role of mood has been discussed with contrasting results: on one side, Cialdini et al. [10] proposed a negative-state relief hypothesis stating that people facing a negative mood tend to display more prosocial behaviors in order to overcome negative thoughts patterns compared to people with a positive mood. On the other side, people with a good mood could behave prosocially to maintain positive feelings [11].

Children start to display prosocial behavior during infancy. About its origin, social learning theory states that people learn how to behave by observing how a model acts, thus, prosocial behavior is a social behavior that can be learned. Baumann et al. [12] proposed a three-step developmental sequence posing that, during childhood, it is a result of material rewards and punishments, during preadolescence, prosocial behavior is a product of social and material rewards and punishments, while during adolescence and adulthood, prosocial behavior is a product of internalized self-reward.

The likelihood of showing prosocial behavior depends on both individual characteristics (as high levels of self-esteem) and situational factors (for example, the number of people that are observing a scene) [13,14]. School and sports are the most important arenas for children’s socialization, and since prosocial behavior is an interpersonal activity, a great occurrence of this behavior is expected in this context [15–17]. For what concerns children from the school context, for example, prosocial behavior seems to be related to low levels of victimization, and as Raskauskas et al. [17] recommended that to reduce bullying behaviors, teachers should foster empathy in children by providing practical examples.

The viewpoints of researchers are not consistent when it comes to the presence and manifestations of aggression in sports [18–20]. Some authors claim that there is a lower level of aggression in sports because athletes actually “channel” aggression through physical activity. The eventual manifestation of aggression is socially acceptable because it is manifested in a sporting context [20]. Contrary to such claims, some authors claim that the level of stress exposure in athletes is higher, which is why the manifestation of aggression is more common [18,21,22]. There are also claims that prosocial behavior and group cohesion are protective factors for peer aggression and victimization [19,22]. Prosocial behavior has been found to reduce peer rejection in adolescents and promote peer attachment.

Generally, children’s prosocial behavior is related to mature moral reasoning, while antisocial behavior seems to be related to less moral reasoning maturity [23]. Concerning social and contextual influences on prosocial behavior, the school seems to play a crucial role since its occurrence is less likely when students are not familiar with each other [24,25].

Nevertheless, relevant research indicated an inverse relationship between aggressive individuals and prosocial behaviors [26]. Specifically, more aggressive individuals might be less likely to carry out some prosocial behaviors, like trusting others or trying to help others. Moreover, cohesion represents the tendency of a group to stick together to achieve the goal [27], and as such, it can be suggested that more aggressive individuals will show a lower tendency to group cohesion and less satisfaction with their groups/teams. Furthermore, a wide variety of research has shown the importance of motivation in sport and physical education environment [28–30]. Based on the self-determination theory [29], motivation can be divided into intrinsic (e.g., doing an activity for fun and enjoyment) and extrinsic (e.g., doing an activity because of external factors, such as medals, coaches, or significant others). A distinction can be made between autonomous (e.g., doing an activity with a sense of choice) and controlled (e.g., be active because someone demands it) motivation, as well. SDT assumes that autonomous and controlled motivations vary in terms of regulatory processes and experiences [31,32]. The current paper is based on the field research results of the European Erasmus Plus Project Sport Against Violence and Exclusion (hereinafter, SAVE), and aims at estimating the occurrence of prosocial behavior and aggressiveness in grass-root sports clubs and the relationship between these two tendencies. Data were collected according to the field research methodology. Therefore, questionnaires were administered directly prior to training sessions in six European countries (Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Lithuania, Italy, Serbia). These are societies of different socio-political and socio-economic backgrounds. Namely, Austria and Italy are Western European capitalist countries, members of the EU, with constant growth and development since the 1950s up today, without major socio-economic crises. Lithuania was the first country that declared its independence from Soviet Union in 1990. The country went through the process of post-socialist transformation and joined the EU in 2004. Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia were republics of SFR Yugoslavia (SFRY) since the end of WWII until the 1990s. After the disintegration of SFRY, those republics went through processes of post-war and post-socialism transformations. Croatia became an EU member in 2013, Bosnia and Herzegovina has the status of a potential candidate country for accession to EU and Serbia has the status of a candidate country for accession to EU. With the view of those socio-cultural contexts, this research aims to compare the characteristics of prosocial and aggressive behavior of children and youth in the sports environment within those societies. Therefore, the current research is a research report determining the frequency of aggressive behavior and social exclusion in the youth environment, the frequency of prosocial behavior and cohesion in the youth environment, the frequency of personal experience of peer violence (either verbal or physical) or social exclusion, and to evaluate cross-national differences in terms of occurrence of these phenomena. Since it is a research report, we do not have specific hypotheses on the occurrence of aggressive and prosocial behavior, nor on specific differences across countries.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The sample of the subjects consisted of athletes between the ages of 6 and 16 years (the total sample size is  $N = 482$ ) from six countries included in the SAVE project (Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, and Serbia) who completed a multi-section questionnaire including all the study variables. The questionnaire completion took up to 30 min. The subsample size included participants from Austria ( $n = 59$ ), Bosnia and Herzegovina ( $n = 52$ ), Croatia ( $n = 132$ ), Italy ( $n = 131$ ), Lithuania ( $n = 67$ ), and Serbia ( $n = 41$ ). The overall sample is predominantly male. Only Serbia had more female participants included in the sample. The average age in sports club athletes' samples varied between 9.5 years ( $SD = 1.6$ ), in the Italian sample, up to 12.4 years ( $SD = 1.5$ ), in the Croatian sample. Among the sample of athletes in all of the European countries included, football is the most common sport, followed by basketball in Lithuania and volleyball in Serbia.

In order to make a valid and confident assessment of the youth environment in sports clubs, the study also included coach assessment of the youth environment in sports clubs. The purpose of

coach assessment was to fill the possible gap of previously conducted desk research and focus-group discussions, by providing their own perception of violent and social exclusion behaviors in their sports clubs. The sample of coaches was composed of coaches of individual and collective sports, of both genders, with years of experience in youth sports. The interviewees were first acquainted with the methodology of conducting the focus group and were assured that their names were not going to be in any way connected to the analysis. Each interviewee received a Privacy Statement, that s/he read and acknowledged.

The questionnaire data were collected after initial contact with sports clubs and were used to provide information about the research aims and purpose throughout the written information form constructed by the SAVE project team. Initial contact was used to acquire a formal consent from sports club management to conduct the research in their environment and to distribute, and later on, collect, project approving consent forms signed by children's parents. The study was approved by the Institutional review board of Faculty of Sport and Physical Education, University of Novi Sad (Ref. No. 564/2018; approved on 1 October 2018). Participants, their parents, and club representatives were informed that all data would be processed and managed in accordance with the legislation on the protection of personal data and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Participants' responses were anonymous and confidential. Only fully completed questionnaires were subjected to further analysis.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Youth Environment Assessment

Two main parts of the questionnaire were designed to determine which personal characteristics of young athletes are involved in the sports club environment. The Youth Environment Assessment questionnaire battery was prepared by using original versions or by adapting different questionnaires or scales, respectively:

1. Prosocial Behavior Scale (PBS; [33]) is a questionnaire measuring the child's behavior denoting altruism, trust, and agreeableness. It consists of 15 items (often = 3; sometimes = 2; never = 1) containing five control items.
2. Direct and Indirect Aggression Scale (DIAS; [34]) for assessing the frequency of occurrence of physical, verbal, and indirect aggression. It consists of 24 items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 = never to 4 = very often. The questionnaire contains seven items assessing physical aggression, five for verbal aggression, and 12 for indirect aggression.
3. Youth Sports Environment Questionnaire [35] for assessing youth cohesion in a group. In the current study, we used the subscale Cohesion, which is made up of eight items on a nine-point Likert scale.
4. Two items measuring the personal experience of violence within the sports group and kids' reactions toward it. The items were "Have you personally experienced peer violence (verbally or physically) or exclusion from your group in the last two years?" (Yes/No), and "If yes, how much did it hurt your feelings at the time?" (measured on 1 = not at all to 5 = fully).

### 2.2.2. Youth Characteristics Questionnaire

The Youth Characteristics Questionnaire battery consists of the adaptation of four questionnaires that were used to assess the climate within the sports environment. The battery is made up of the following measures:

1. Sport Motivation Scale [36,37] consists of 20 items on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = I don't agree to 5 = I fully agree). The questionnaire was divided into intrinsic motivation scales (Intrinsic Motivation to Experience Stimulation, Intrinsic Motivation to Know, Intrinsic Motivation to

- Accomplish Things), extrinsic motivation scales (Extrinsic Motivation—External Regulation, Extrinsic Motivation—Introjected, Extrinsic Motivation—Identified) and one scale for amotivation.
2. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; [38]) is a 10-item questionnaire measured on a four-point Likert scale, assessing the individual's self-esteem.
  3. The subscale Optimism from the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; [39]) consists of three items assessing Optimism among people on a four-point Likert scale (from 1= strongly disagree to 4= strongly agree).
  4. Children Hope Scale (CHS; [40]) consists of six items measured on a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1= none of the time to 6= all of the time. The questionnaire assesses youth skills to identify goals and strategies to pursue these goals.
  5. Two items measuring the personal experience of violence within the sports group and kids' reactions toward it (see the Youth Environment Assessment).

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all the variables included in the current research by providing means and standard deviation distinguished for the countries which took part in the data collection. The scores for individual scales and subscales were calculated based on each scale's regulations and notes. Then, descriptive measures were calculated for each item. Afterward, every scale was divided by the number of items, and all possible results were ranged between 1.00 up to 5.00 to make the measures comparable. The results have been evaluated and interpreted in accordance with the given criteria from Table 1.

**Table 1.** Scheme for interpretation of average scores.

Result (Mean of Scale or Mean of Item)	Range						
	1.00–1.74	1.75–2.14	2.15–2.74	2.75–3.15	3.16–3.75	3.76–4.15	4.16–5.00
Interpretation	Extremely Low	Very low	Low	Moderate	High	Very high	Extremely High

Source: authors' calculations.

One-way ANOVA was conducted to determine differences between study variables (i.e., prosocial behavior, physical aggression, verbal aggression, indirect aggression, cohesion, satisfaction with group, general, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-esteem, optimism, hope) across the six European countries, with Tukey HSD a post-hoc test. Discriminant analysis was additionally applied to determine the difference across variables between groups with and groups without personal experience of violence and social exclusion.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 (the following data are provided for the age variable in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 65% of participants belong to the age group between 15 and 18 years of age, 27% were between 10 and 14 years of age, and older than 18 constitute 8% of the entire sample) presents the number of participants by gender, the mean age, and mean values of tested study variables across six countries.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of all variables included in the research across countries.

Country	Male Female	Age	M SD Range											
	Gender		Prosocial Behavior	Physical Aggression	Verbal Aggression	Indirect Aggression	Cohesion	Satisfaction with Group	General Motivation	Intrinsic Motivation	Extrinsic Motivation	Self-Esteem	Optimism	Hope
1. Austria	58 1	12.0 0.1	3.72 0.65 2.10–5.00	1.54 0.64 1.00–5.00	1.58 0.61 1.00–4.80	1.43 0.57 1.00–4.83	3.62 1.02 1.00–5.00	4.71 0.74 1.00–5.00	3.85 0.65 2.25–4.96	4.26 0.58 2.75–5.00	3.43 0.90 1.25–5.00	4.07 0.50 3.00–5.00	3.44 0.52 2.33–5.00	4.02 0.65 2.50–5.00
2. Bosnia and Herzegovina	43 9	-	3.92 0.60 2.50–5.00	1.54 0.62 1.00–3.86	1.73 0.68 1.00–4.40	1.44 0.67 1.00–3.83	4.17 0.82 2.00–5.00	4.63 0.66 2.00–5.00	4.23 0.76 1.60–5.00	4.45 0.70 1.83–5.00	4.02 0.97 1.38–5.00	4.19 0.61 2.70–5.00	3.74 0.64 2.17–5.00	4.34 0.61 3.00–5.00
3. Croatia	73 59	12.4 1.5	4.13 0.51 2.90–5.00	1.63 0.68 1.00–4.71	1.89 0.68 1.00–4.60	1.48 0.51 1.00–3.92	4.19 0.75 1.30–5.00	4.78 0.56 1.00–5.00	3.92 0.68 1.71–5.00	4.34 0.64 2.25–5.00	3.51 0.90 1.00–5.00	3.95 0.68 1.40–5.00	3.55 0.68 1.67–5.00	4.02 0.72 1.00–5.00
4. Italy	112 19	9.5 1.6	3.69 0.64 1.80–4.70	1.71 0.86 1.00–4.00	1.83 0.71 0.80–4.20	1.64 0.68 0.83–4.08	3.28 0.95 1.37–5.00	4.42 0.97 1.00–5.00	3.71 0.63 1.83–5.00	3.91 0.64 1.92–5.00	3.50 0.77 1.50–5.00	3.70 0.63 2.40–5.00	3.90 0.75 1.83–5.00	3.44 0.61 1.67–5.00
5. Lithuania	45 22	11.8 1.0	3.71 0.23 2.60–4.70	1.36 0.29 1.00–4.00	1.67 0.33 1.00–3.20	1.35 0.18 1.00–2.75	3.65 0.95 1.13–5.00	4.73 0.35 2.00–5.00	3.96 0.38 2.04–5.00	4.20 0.38 1.33–5.00	3.72 0.66 1.75–5.00	3.95 0.51 2.20–5.00	3.83 0.41 2.33–5.00	4.08 0.60 2.50–5.00
6. Serbia	17 24	12.3 1.3	3.82 0.56 2.70–4.60	1.39 0.47 1.00–3.29	1.76 0.65 1.00–4.60	1.52 0.62 1.00–3.58	3.66 0.98 1.38–5.00	4.54 0.84 2.00–5.00	3.98 0.75 2.33–5.00	4.29 0.66 2.83–5.00	3.66 0.95 1.50–5.00	3.83 0.71 2.20–4.90	3.59 0.75 1.83–5.00	3.88 0.70 2.33–5.00

Legend: m—male; f—female; M—mean; SD—standard deviation; Range—from minimal result to maximum result.

### 3.2. Youth Environment Assessment

Prosocial behavior distribution is high across European country and varies from high (Italy, mean = 3.69, SD = 0.64) to very high (Croatia, mean = 4.13, SD = 0.51). Conversely, children reported a low occurrence of aggression. Specifically, the occurrence of physical aggression varies from low (Italy, mean = 1.71, SD = 0.86) to very low (Lithuania, mean = 1.36, SD = 0.29), while verbal aggression varies from very low (Croatia, mean = 1.89, SD = 0.68) to extremely low (Austria, mean = 1.58, SD = 0.64). Indirect aggression occurrence is extremely low in all the countries. Finally, concerning cohesion, it varies from high (Italy, mean = 3.28, SD = 0.95) to very high (Croatia, mean = 4.19, SD = 0.75).

### 3.3. Youth Characteristics Questionnaire

General motivation ranges from high (Italy, mean = 3.71, SD = 0.63) to extremely high (Bosnia and Herzegovina, mean = 4.23, SD = 0.76). Concerning intrinsic motivation, its results vary from very high (Italy, mean = 3.91, SD = 0.64) to extremely high (Bosnia and Herzegovina, mean = 4.45, SD = 0.64). Similar results were found in relation to extrinsic motivation, that revealed to vary from high (Austria, mean = 3.43, SD = 0.90) to very high (Bosnia and Herzegovina, mean = 4.02, SD = 0.97). Self-esteem levels vary from high (Italy, mean = 3.70, SD = 0.63) to extremely high (Bosnia and Herzegovina, mean = 4.19, SD = 0.61). Concerning the distribution of optimism, it ranges from high (Austria, mean = 3.44, SD = 0.52) to extremely high (Bosnia and Herzegovina, mean = 3.74, SD = 0.64), while hope resulted to be high (Italy, mean = 3.44, SD = 0.61) up to extremely high (Bosnia and Herzegovina, mean = 4.34, SD = 0.61).

### 3.4. Personal Experience of Violence

Among the measured sports club samples across the European countries, the percentage of athletes who have had personal experience of violence or social exclusion in last two years and who had their feelings hurt by the personal experience assessed to be on the scale between a lot (4) or fully (5) measure, is approximately at 25%. Due to the rated personal experience of violence or social exclusion, the research has found that approximately from 2% up to 7% of total number of children and adolescents in European sports clubs had 'severe' personal experience of violence or social exclusion. The differences of the assessed youth environment and personal characteristics by the status of personal experience of violence and exclusion in the last two years of the subjects are determined by the discriminant analysis.

The results obtained by discriminant analysis for determining differences across variables between groups with and groups without personal experience of violence and social exclusion are not consistent, comparing the three most numerous samples of athletes: In Croatia, no significant difference was found ( $\chi^2 = 15.91$ ,  $p = 0.15$ ), in the Italian sample, a significant difference was found ( $\chi^2 = 38.31$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), and in the Lithuanian sample, a significant difference was found ( $\chi^2 = 22.86$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ). In both samples (Italy and Lithuania) where the differences were determined, the group of athletes with personal experience of violence and exclusion in the last two years scored higher results of aggression variables, and lower on personal characteristics variables (self-esteem, optimism, hope, or motivation for sport) compared to the other group of athletes without such experience.

### 3.5. Cross-National Comparisons

One-way ANOVA was used to determine the differences in prosocial behavior, different types of aggression, cohesion, satisfaction with group, motivation, self-esteem, optimism and hope across the European countries involved in the project.

Countries significantly differed in prosocial behavior ( $F(5,476) = 10.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Specifically, athletes in Croatia scored significantly higher on prosocial behavior ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ), compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Italy ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and Lithuania ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Regarding aggression, significant differences between countries were detected in physical aggression ( $F(5,476) = 3.29$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Athletes in Italy ( $M = 1.71$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) scored



significantly higher on physical aggression compared to athletes in Lithuania ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Additionally, significant differences between countries were detected in verbal aggression ( $F(5,476) = 2.55$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ). Specifically, athletes in Croatia ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) scored significantly higher on verbal aggression compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 1.58$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ). Finally, significant differences between countries were detected in indirect aggression, ( $F(5,476) = 2.87$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), where athletes in Italy ( $M = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) scored higher on indirect aggression than athletes in Lithuania ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 0.18$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Significant differences in cohesion were detected across countries ( $F(5,476) = 16.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Specifically, athletes in Croatia ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) scored significantly higher on cohesion compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Italy ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Lithuania ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), and Serbia ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), while athletes in Bosnia and Herzegovina ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) reported higher scores on cohesion compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ), Italy ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Lithuania ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). Significant differences were also found across countries in satisfaction with the sports group,  $F(5,476) = 3.80$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Croatian athletes ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) reported higher scores on satisfaction with group than Italian athletes ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Countries significantly differ in terms of different types of motivation. In particular, for general motivation ( $F(5, 476) = 5.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), athletes in Bosnia and Herzegovina ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) reported higher scores, compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ), Croatia ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ), and Italy ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, for the intrinsic motivation,  $F(5, 476) = 9.29$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , athletes in Italy ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ) scored significantly lower than athletes in Austria ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), Bosnia and Herzegovina ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Croatia ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Lithuania ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ), and Serbia ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Finally, for the extrinsic motivation,  $F(5, 476) = 3.98$ ,  $p = 0.001$ , athletes in Bosnia and Herzegovina ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) scored significantly higher compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), Croatia ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and Italy ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Significant differences in self-esteem were detected across countries ( $F(5,476) = 6.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In particular, Italian athletes ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) reported lower levels of self-esteem compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), Bosnia and Herzegovina ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and Croatia ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Significant differences across countries were also found in optimism ( $F(5,476) = 6.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Specifically, Italian athletes ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) scored significantly higher on optimism compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and Croatia ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, significant differences across countries were found in hope ( $F(5, 476) = 20.02$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In particular, athletes in Italy ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) scored significantly lower on hope compared to athletes in Austria ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Bosnia and Herzegovina ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Croatia ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), Lithuania ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and Serbia ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), while athletes in Bosnia and Herzegovina scored significantly higher on hope compared to athletes in Croatia ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and Serbia ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### 3.6. Coaches' Perception

Coaches' 'perception' of the youth environment (Table 3) in sports clubs differ from the assessments of the youth environment assessed by the athletes. These differences vary from 0.02 up to 1.74. It can be concluded that coaches could not easily and precisely perceive and evaluate the youth environment characteristics. Furthermore, they 'needed' a professional or expert help for assessing these issues that could be provided by the SAVE project. (During the implementation of the SAVE project, after the field research, the researchers also conducted a pilot training: Theoretical and practical five weeks training of individual and team sports coaches, as well as sports and physical education students, on social sciences theories of peer aggression and violence. The training also included workshops where coaches "practiced" crisis management skills caused by peer aggression and violence in sports.)



**Table 3.** Coaches' and athletes' youth sports club environment assessments.

Country (n of Coaches)	Prosocial Behavior		Physical Aggression		Verbal Aggression		Indirect Aggression		Cohesion		Satisfaction with Group	
	CO	ATH	CO	ATH	CO	ATH	CO	ATH	CO	ATH	CO	ATH
Austria (5)	3.58	3.72	1.43	1.54	1.56	1.58	1.27	1.43	3.75	3.62	4.40	4.71
Bosnia and Herzegovina (10)	3.83	3.92	1.50	1.54	1.68	1.73	1.71	1.44	3.75	4.17	4.10	4.63
Croatia (12)	4.18	4.13	1.57	1.63	2.08	1.89	1.78	1.48	4.29	4.19	4.58	4.78
Italy (10)	3.67	3.69	1.81	1.71	1.86	1.83	1.65	1.64	3.81	3.28	4.40	4.42
Lithuania (11)	3.67	3.71	1.83	1.36	1.87	1.67	1.68	1.35	3.86	3.65	4.27	4.73
Serbia (5)	3.34	3.82	1.69	1.39	2.12	1.76	1.93	1.52	3.73	3.66	2.80	4.54

Legend: CO—coaches; ATH—athletes.

As for the observation results conducted during the training sessions, categorized and observed behaviors of violence and social exclusion show only very rare occurrences.

#### 4. Discussion

The current paper is a research report about the occurrence of aggressive behavior and peer-violence within sports clubs, as well as prosocial behavior of children who are participating in sports. The field research was conducted in six European countries and each country on a sample of children aged 6 to 16 years.

Results showed that aggressive behaviors have a rare or sporadic occurrence, predominantly in the form of verbal aggression in sports club environment. The lowest occurrence is determined for indirect aggressive behaviors, which makes sports clubs a very desirable environment for a complete identity development of children in a low-risk environment [3,16,41,42]. Conversely, our results showed a high occurrence of prosocial behavior and a high level of cohesion across Europe.

Prosocial behavior can be strengthened through the sports activity and education towards its values. For example, a research of Sukys et al. [43] showed the benefits of the Olympic education, centered on values as fairness, equality, and morality, on children's prosocial behavior. This result has also been retrieved in the current research report, finding a high prevalence of prosocial behavior in children from sports clubs. Moreover, sport can be a great tool to enhance team cohesion, since the sports team can reach its goal (e.g., victory) only through strong cooperation and interdependency among its members [44].

Concerning the school environment, sport motivation was still high, including both general and intrinsic motivation. However, children also reported high levels of extrinsic motivation, probably because their motivation to engage in a sport was mandatory (i.e., physical education class). A similar result was found by Navarro-Patón et al. [45], where high levels of external regulation were found across school children referring to their physical education class, and this result was also connected to low levels of enjoyment. Concerning general characteristics, such as self-esteem, hope, and optimism, these are indicators of life satisfaction across students, as shown by Çikrikci et al. [46].

The focused question about the frequency of personal experience of peer violence (either verbal or physical) or social exclusion of our subjects and the bad effect it caused acquired different responses among countries included in the sample of this research. The percentage of personal experience of violence or social exclusion assessed by the athletes varies between 7.90 in the Bosnia and Herzegovina sample, up to 27.30 in the Croatian sample. The percentage of athletes who have had personal experience of violence or social exclusion in last two years and who had their feelings hurt by the personal experience assessed to be on the scale between a lot (4) or fully (5) measure, is approximately around 25%. Due to the rated personal experience of violence or social exclusion, in European sports clubs, approximately 2% to 7% of children and adolescents reported 'severe' personal experience of violence or social exclusion (or it could be expected in the near future). This result is very similar to the study of Vertommen et al. [47], finding a percentage of 38% including, all the forms of violence in

Belgium and the Netherlands. These results indicate that violence is common in Europe, especially for minority groups (LGBT, disabled, ethnic minority).

From the coach perspective, considering the observation report, it can be concluded that the methodology of observation is not adequate for detecting such patterns of violence and exclusion behaviors, and the underlying shortcoming is the short-term presence of researchers/observers. It is evident that for noticing these aspects during training sessions, a researcher has to observe sessions consistently during a more extended period of time. Children often hide these patterns, and the fact that coaches point them out emphasizes the fact that these behaviors still exist, but they need to be observed for a longer period of time. Even the coaches have to be 'released' from the wide-ranging expectations (parents, club management, or children) so they would and could easily observe aggressive, violent, and social exclusion behaviors. These observations from European countries confirm coaches' 'claim' (derived from previously conducted focus-group discussions) that aggressive and exclusion behaviors are predominantly covert and are hidden for everyone outside the athlete's peer group/team.

Field research measurement presents some limitations connected to the choice of the methodology. Firstly, the paper offers an overview across Europe with different aspects of youth life, and the data were collected in the field, where the attention of people involved could be directed at other aspects (the training outcomes for the athletes or the school tasks for the students). Moreover, the questionnaires used are not validated in the European countries (examples: Testing the quality of the translation to a particular language, calculating and checking basic metric characteristics of each scale used, and validating these measures on the specific populations of children and adolescents). Additionally, there is a relatively small number of subjects in each country samples and relatively inhomogeneous groups of subjects by gender and by age. These limitations caused the lack of results regarding the differences in the assessed youth environment and personal characteristics by gender and age. Finally, we employed self-report measures that have been sensitive to social desirability as their main limitation. Hence, it is not excluded that children answered based on the premise that it is good to show prosocial behaviour and bad to show aggression behaviours.

This research report acknowledges violence and social exclusion among children as existing social issues across different European countries. The sport contexts seem to be a desirable environment for the prevention of these issues among children from a very early age. Sport is considered to be an adequate area for identity development, socialization, and tolerance and cohesion development among children, which are most definitely desirable values in contemporary society. Considering that the research was conducted in six European societies, it turns out that the phenomenon of prosocial and aggressive behavior of children and young people in sports is actually uniform, that is, it does not depend to a large extent on the wider socio-economic characteristics of a particular society. This may be in support of the claim that sport is a social phenomenon that provides a good basis for the development of healthy lifestyles since it has a positive effect on the mental and physical health of children and young people [15,16]. The current paper aimed to give some initial numbers concerning the occurrence of violence and prosocial behavior across European sports clubs. From this research report, it clearly emerges that children experience some violence within the sports club, indicating the need for more specialized knowledge for coaches and some prevention initiatives for children, to stimulate their consciousness towards this issue. Future research should investigate if personal characteristics, such as hope, self-esteem, optimism, and motivation, can modulate the externalization of aggression and prosocial behavior.

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